



# State of North Dakota

## Dept. of Public Instruction – Direct Certification



**Business Unit/Program Area:** Food and Nutrition

**Project Sponsor:** Linda Schloer

**Project Manager:** Brenda Bulawa

**Background Summary:** The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 mandates direct certification of children in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households.

In response to Reauthorization requirements, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (DPI) entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the ND Department of Human Services (DHS) for the purpose of sharing participation data for direct certification of eligible children for meal benefits through USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

DPI initially implemented temporary Direct Certification procedures, which matched student enrollment data from DPI with child participation data from DHS. The temporary process was time consuming and was completed only twice a year. Since many children newly enrolled in the SNAP and TANF programs every day, schools needed the ability to match their enrollment records to SNAP and TANF participation on a daily basis. This project provided that ability.

The state decided to use DHS's Master Client Index (MCI) system to match students in the SNAP and TANF systems to students in DPI's STate Automated Reporting System (STARS) system. Schools can now access the information in real-time from the STARS system and download data into their school food service systems.

### Business Objectives

The state wanted to ensure that all qualified publicly and participating privately enrolled students are identified as eligible for program participation. The state compared the legacy manual Direct Certification participation results with an automated result report to determine if there was an increase of eligibility. We found that after implementation the manual match recognized 18,223 students eligible for direct certification and Direct Certification matched 19,134 and, more importantly, the automated system identified all of the 18,223 manual matches. The original goal was to see a 2% increase in matching. The actual improvement was 5%.

**Schedule Objectives:** The project completed 4 months (29.2%) behind schedule.

**Budget Objectives:** The project completed \$105,971 (9.5%) under budget.

### Lessons Learned

- Due to core staffing change, the project missed some Subject Matter Experts during analysis. Several key requirements were not caught and rectified until User Acceptance Testing.
- Need to define deliverables more thoroughly with outside vendors. The description tends to be vague and no sample templates available. More time needed to be scheduled for signoff.
- Incomplete use cases were created during analysis leaving several key elements not configured until User Acceptance Testing. Outside vendors need to participate in use case review asking for further details or clarifications.
- When using an outside vendor it would be preferred to do a fixed bid not a time and material.



### Success Stories

DPI, Food and Nutrition Program, has been running a manual process to match students in direct certification in cooperation with DHS for several years. One of the team's project objectives was that the automated system



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would improve matching by 2%. After thorough analysis the Project Sponsor has identified that the new system is matching 5% more students throughout the state. The following are a sampling of various school districts:

- Grand Forks – 7% Increase
- Beulah – 12% Increase
- Jamestown – 30% Increase

### Benefits

This project delivered value in many ways. First and foremost, are the children who are more likely to receive a hot, nutritious meal because the state removed so many barriers in its processes. The parents of those students no longer have to deal with paperwork getting lost, spilled on, buried in the bottom of a backpack, or the stigma of applying for assistance. Schools have real-time access and the ability to download student eligibility data from the system. State agencies save mailing costs and staff time while meeting Federal and State requirements.

At the time of implementation, North Dakota was the only state of ten in the Mountain Plains Region that did real-time direct certification eligibility determination and notifications.

The prior certification process required families notify the school of eligibility and not all families would participate for various reasons; their children, especially when entering high school, did not want the school lunch or were not present for lunch due to jobs. Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) certification is also a funding mechanism to the Local Education Agency (LEA) as FRL identifies poverty levels; regardless of the participation of the students, the LEA receives funding based on the levels. The direct certification of students has increased funding to the LEA.



- Statewide, the number of students directly certified increased 42% from School Year 2010 to School Year 2011.

- On average, each additional student determined eligible for free meals equals an additional \$185 of federal reimbursement for the district based on the statewide average paid meal prices and participation. That is an impact of \$168,535 in additional Federal funding to the schools for just the initial 5% increase in matching.

- Schools may extend free meal benefits to all children in household if only one child is directly certified
- The number of free or reduced price students at the school affects many other sources of funding including federal and state educational programs, technology fees and other competitive grants
- Direct certification process is completed daily, so students who receive benefits during the school year and/or move to a new school district are identified

as eligible for free meals at the time they receive benefits and/or are enrolled in STARS

Operational effectiveness and efficiencies include:

- No potential errors in application determination
- Reduced staff time needed for determining applications
- Direct certifications do not have to be verified
- Direct Certification is done through a statewide student enrollment management system providing consistency between school districts
- Reports have been automated so the reporting process is less time consuming and more accurate

The Direct Certification system was created with the use of USDA grant funds. Other state agencies may request copies of all system documentation upon request.